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Too Much Trouble?

John 10:11-18

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CPC 5/14/00, Mother's Day

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In 1991, a movie came to the screens called *Defending Your Life*. The premise was that a man, who had died, found himself in Judgment City, and was confronted with a playback of his entire life. In this context, the man was required to justify himself. Seeing the movie in a rerun, I found it appealing and horrifying at the same time. To see *my* entire life in playback mode would be an exquisite torture. I know what it would do to me - it would drive me to my knees and to an honest declaration that I can be justified no other way but through faith in Jesus Christ.

But suppose I am able to see the playback while I am still alive. Suppose I am given divine perspective on the life I have lived so far. Would I make any changes? Would I film any second takes? Of course I would. Wouldn't you?

The other day I was suggesting to one of our elders that people might be divided into three groups, three different ways of approaching life. I know people in all three groups and you do too.

The first group has the view that life is a threat, that you need to spend all of your energies protecting yourself from those who will abuse you if given half a chance. You don't share a lot of yourself with people because you might get hurt, you don't extend too far because you just know someone will hurt you for no good reason, and you position yourself defensively in all things. You are a passive participant in life. You are a victim.

The second group has the view that life is engagement with some wins and some losses. You need to share yourself with people because that's how you grow, but you need to recognize that not everyone is healthy and there is the possibility you might get hurt. But you live with that possibility as an acceptable risk. You are an active participant in life. You accept responsibility for where you are.

The third group has the view that life is winning all the battles. You aggressively tackle everything that comes your way. You don't share yourself unless you see some way to gain by the sharing. Everything is a contest - it's that way at work, it's that way in relationships, it's that way when you drive. You know how to listen to others but you do so in order to get what you want. People exist to be used. You are an active participant in life. You accept some responsibility for where you are but, like the victim, you are ready to blame if others get in your way. You are a conqueror.

Clearly, most *healthy* people are in the second group. Both the victim and the conqueror are driven by fears - the one to hide, the other not to lose - and their fears skew their ability to speak to (or hear) the majority second group. And skew their ability to speak to themselves. And to God.

The scripture today highlights Jesus as the good shepherd. The good shepherd is contrasted with the hireling shepherd who places his own well-being ahead of the job of protecting the sheep. Push come to shove, the hireling shepherd decides that protecting the sheep is too much trouble. But it's really more than that. The hireling shepherd is in the business of exploiting sheep. The sheep are there for the sake of the hireling. The hireling shepherd makes his living off the sheep - their wool, their progeny, even their flesh and skin. The hireling shepherd is the ultimate conqueror. Nothing matters to the conqueror but self.

The sheep represent the passive victims who need to be protected because they can't protect themselves. They are oblivious to anything but eating. The sheep live fearful lives, skirting this way and that way, defensive, self-absorbed.

My thesis on this Mother's Day is that we can choose who we'd like to be. The John passage describes what Jesus is like, but throughout the Gospels and the Epistles there is the sense that after one accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord, one *wants* to become like Jesus. A Christian, after all, is a follower of Christ. So it's natural for us to both see in this passage a description of Jesus, and a possible direction for our life as well.

Those who truly have Christ within, those who have truly come to a saving knowledge of Jesus, those who have truly made a heart commitment to Christ and who have the Holy Spirit dwelling within, all of those here who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ, we all live with a tension, a strain, because the values of the world pull us away from the values of our Lord and Savior. Some of us withdraw and develop a defensive posture, and become victims - sheep, if you will. Others of us get caught up in the pursuit of wealth or success or just simply winning, and become conquerors - hireling shepherds, if you will. Others of us, hopefully most of us, choose the middle path, the path of emotional health, and try to imitate Jesus the good shepherd by engaging life fairly, by being responsible for our faults alone, and by being generous for the faults of others. The good shepherds learn to fix the problem, not the blame.

Who will you choose to be? I suggested in a sermon a few years ago that we can't really aspire to be shepherds. The most we can become is sheep dogs, the shepherd's helpers who work under the direction of the shepherd. But of the three choices, sheep/victim or Good Shepherd/Jesus or hireling shepherd/conqueror, I am willing to say to which role I aspire. I may only be a sheep dog, but *I want to be like* the Good Shepherd. I want to be like Jesus.

Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has written: "When a chap is in love, he will go out in all kinds of weather to keep an appointment with his beloved. Love can be demanding, in fact more demanding than law. Love has its own imperatives - think of a mother sitting by the bedside of a sick child through the night, impelled only by love. Nothing is too much trouble for love."

Do you agree with Bishop Tutu? Do you agree that 'nothing is too much trouble for love'? You know, a few chapters after this passage, still in the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches that a person can have no greater love than to lay down his (or her) life for another. We know that Jesus did just this on Calvary, but we often overlook that He laid down His life day by day in ministry for His sheep. Was it a lot of trouble for Jesus? Sure. Were His disciples quick studies? No. Are we more obedient than difficult? No. Yet, *none* of it was too much trouble for Jesus. And maybe that's how our choice gets highlighted.

My mother gave generously of her love to our family. She chose to be a good shepherd. I honor her more than life itself. I accept the fact that she could have chosen otherwise, and that many mothers do choose otherwise - some become sheep and

pass on victim-hood to their children; others become hireling shepherds and pass on perpetual conquering to their children. But even if you stand today as a victim, or stand today as a conqueror, you *can* make a different choice. Today there's hope. Today you can decide to be like the Good Shepherd, like Jesus.

Our mothers, like our fathers, are to be honored. But if Jesus is to be our guide, honoring them doesn't mean either idealizing or idolizing them. It means seeing them both for who they are and who they are not. It means speaking the truth to them. It means the best way of repaying them for their love is to love God and our neighbor as faithfully and selflessly as at their best our parents have tried to love us. And, I believe, it means seeing they are taken care of to the end of their days.

Whether or not you are a mother, the question remains - who do you aspire to be? If you want to be the person for whom 'nothing is too much trouble for love,' then find and follow Jesus tenaciously. Don't let go. Don't compromise. And don't forget what He has done for you.

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